

# TRIBAL UNREST

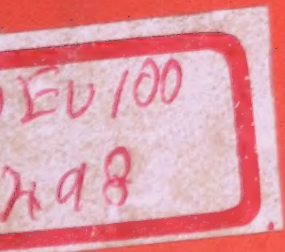
**Whom to blame?**

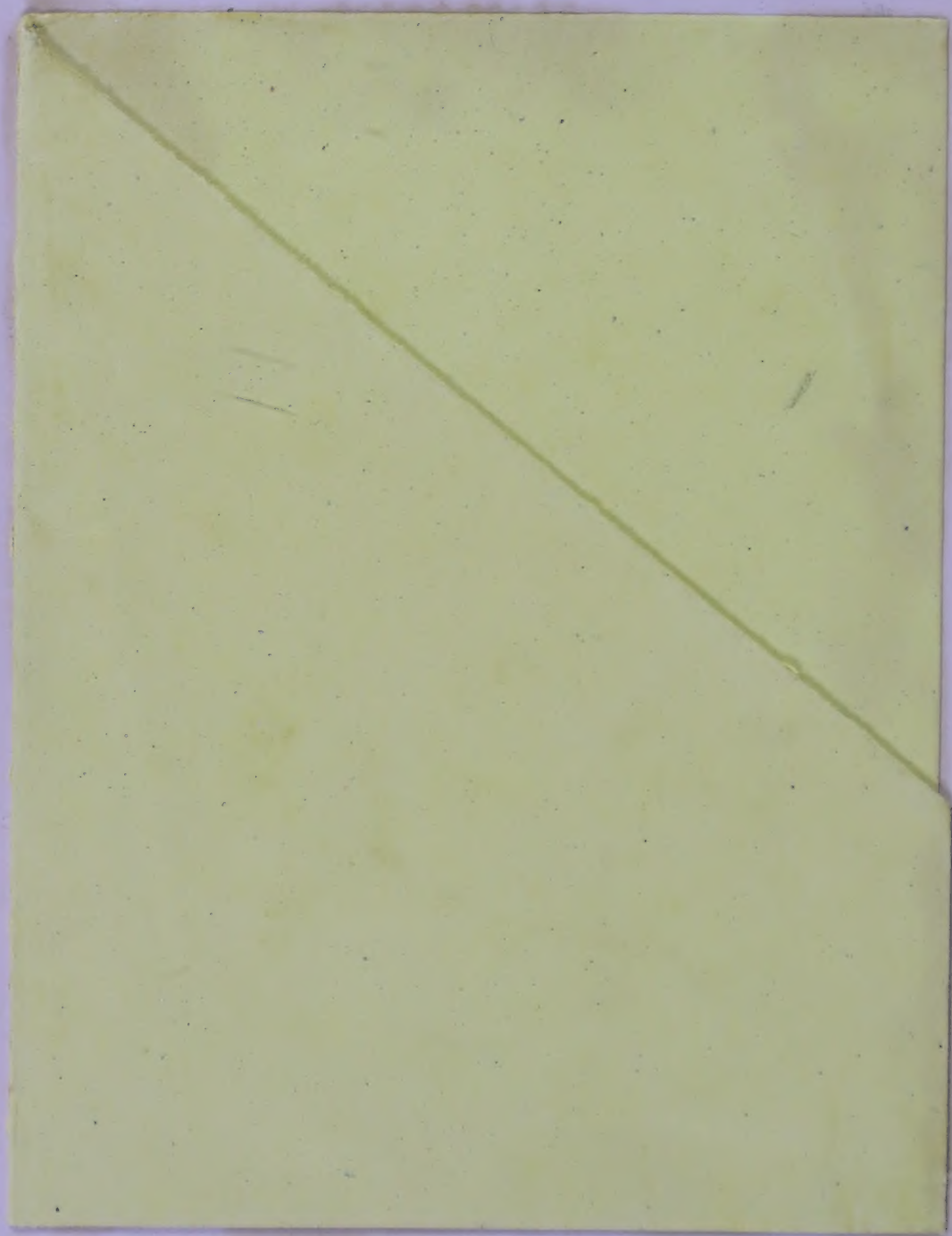
*by*

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## COMMUNITY HEALTH CELL

### Why This Booklet ?

This monograph comes out at a time when India is faced with two major problems, one concerning the Muslims and the other the Christians. The first is the series of Hindu-Muslim clashes in different North Indian towns beginning with the Moradabad communal carnage that occurred on August 13, 1980 (1d day). The second is the by-product of the tribal uprising in the entire North-East and parts of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The charge is that it is the Christians who are responsible for the tribal unrest. Whatever it is, hundreds of innocent Muslims and tribals have been killed in the process.

In both the cases the Government, the ruling class and even some national newspapers have as usual blamed "foreign hands" and "foreign funds" for the trouble. But till the time of writing this, neither the Government - Central or State - nor the ruling class have come out with any proof. This has been the pattern in India. Whenever there is any unrest and violence some foreign hand is discovered.

The Muslims form, according to the 1971 Census, about 12 p.c. of the Indian population - the second highest Muslim population in the world - and the tribals another 8 p.c. Unofficial estimates are much higher. And both form the poorest of the poor.

This booklet deals with the tribal unrest. Till now the official anxiety and sympathy has remained only on paper and not a single State Government can claim a creditable record in tribal welfare. The two biggest problems facing tribals are: - (1) their lands are being



bought over by affluent non-tribals and they are getting pauperised, (2) forests on which they depend for their livelihood are being systematically destroyed. Tribal girls are being taken away for prostitution. This writer, who toured the Bihar tribal belt along with a group of journalists in early 1979, had personally verified this from the tribal leaders.

So much so, it is but natural that discontent is fast spreading among tribals. How long can these innocent, helpless beings tolerate such brutal treatment?

"Andhra Pradesh Girijan revolt, Santhal conversion to Naxalite propaganda in Siliguri and Birbhum, the Jharkhand movement in Chota Nagpur and Midnapore, Rajbhansi complaints in Cooch Behar and some of the upsurges in North-East India reflect tribal determination to resist what they not unjustifiably see as wanton encroachment on their rights". (Statesman editorial - Aug. 31, 1980).

But instead of appreciating their difficulties, let alone solving them, the Government and our ruling class is trying to brutally suppress their struggle. "But ignoring the cause of the malaise, the authorities still seem inclined to blame their discontent on foreigners and missionaries. The evidence is misleadingly circumstantial." (Statesman editorial of Aug. 31, 1980).

A number of charges have been made against the Christians and some Christian organisations have been asked to wind up. But the six-member Central study team headed by Mr. Dinesh Singh, MP, which visited Tripura in July, following the tribal

uprising, has discounted any powerful influence of foreign missionaries. 'It said in its report that Christian missionary activity in Tripura had very limited significance. In Tripura there are just about 16,000 (1.01 %) Christians, according to the 1971 census' (Statesman, Aug. 28, 1980).

Be that as it may, the Muslims and Christians, the two most important religious minorities of India, are feeling that they are second-rate citizens. Contributions of minorities and their selfless service to the welfare of the country's poor are not being acknowledged by the country's vested interests. Now and then they are reminded that they are a suspect.

The monograph is intended to describe the present situation in its proper perspective.

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## **CHRISTIANS, CPM AND RSS**

As unrest and social tension started increasing and the oppressed groups started asserting, it has become fashionable for the ruling class of India to see a "foreign hand" in each and every disturbance. Whether it is the tribal agitation or the Hindu-Muslim communal riots, the ruling class instantly discovers a "foreign hand". Even a responsible editor like Mr. Girilal Jain of the "Times of India" made such an accusation against the Muslims writing about the August 13, 1980 1d day communal carnage at Moradabad, in a front-page signed article (17/8/80) without trying to understand the deep fissures in our society. Whether it is an untouchable, tribal, backward shudra, Muslim or Christian, they are not feeling that they are equal citizens of India. Caste tension is increasing. More and more people are getting pauperised. Exploitation and discrimination at every stage has become the order of the day. The life and property of the minorities and other weaker sections are in danger. The very protectors of law and order, the Government, police, judiciary and even a section of the Press are mostly on the side of the exploiters. This is the cause of the unrest and the consequent violence,

The Dinesh Singh Committee appointed by the Government of India to study the tribal uprising in Tripura (the report was tabled in Parliament in the second week of August, 1980) has come to the very same conclusion about the cause of the tribal unrest.

The Statesman (August 14, 1980) report on the Dinesh Singh committee says: "Tripura's basic problem as indeed of the North-Eastern region as a whole, is, in



the Committee's view, a lack of understanding of the real requirements of the tribals and of making them an integral part of national life. There was an emotional gap that had yet to be bridged. The emphasis so far was more on their material and political development than on psychological and cultural integration''. The report adds: ''The tribals no longer feel secure in their homes and are fearful of domination and exploitation in every respect.''

## **Freedom of Religion Bill**

During the Janata party rule, when the RSS was occupying the seat of power, there was a move to ban conversion through the infamous ''Freedom of Religion Bill'', a private Bill sponsored by a Jan Sangh member. The Bill sparked off a country-wide agitation by Christians and others and the Central Cabinet itself was divided on the Bill which finally died a silent death and with it the Janata Government itself.

Minorities particularly the Muslims and Christians suffered nightmares during the short-lived Janata rule. How the RSS elements controlling the Janata played havoc with the lives of the people is now part of history. Christian missionaries became the target of attack. There was also a big spurt in violence against minorities.

The Janata Party at the instance of the RSS had imposed a ban on the entry of ''outsiders'' into Arunachal Pradesh ''with a view to stopping conversions''. Severe restrictions were imposed on the activities of the Christian missionaries in all the Janata-ruled states like M.P. In some parts of Bihar, priests and nuns were attacked and churches ransacked.



We can understand the RSS-controlled Janata party persecuting the Christian missionaries. But the history is getting repeated under the Congress (I) regime of Indira Gandhi. What is more surprising is that even Leftist Governments controlled by the CPM in West Bengal and Tripura are speaking the language of RSS while criticising the Christian missionaries, with reference to the current tribal uprising in the North-Eastern part of India.

While anti-national, anti-people and anti-social activities have to be condemned and put down with all severity whether they are by Christian missionaries or any body, we are not able to understand how the entire church and Christian missionaries such as Mother Theresa could be accused of such activities. The RSS opposed the award of Bharata Ratna to her.

Wild allegations have been made against Christian institutions by the West Bengal and Tripura CPM-controlled Governments but to this day they have not been able to produce a single evidence to prove their charges. Not only that, an order reported to have been issued by the West Bengal Government Chief Secretary against certain Christian institutions has been withdrawn by Chief Minister Jyoti Basu for want of proof. We admit that religion whether Christian or Hindu is the opium of the masses. Like the Hindu religion, Christian religion too has been siding with the counter-revolution. And it is quite possible that among the Christian organisations working in India there may be some supporting the counter-revolution. Such of them must be named and drastic action taken.



## Marxist Priests

But those criticising the Christian organisations have made false and totally baseless accusations and some of those named are not existing at least at the time of writing this.

It is true that not everything is alright with the Church. Radical or Marxist Christians as they are described in Press reports, (Times of India, June 16, 1980) are critical of the Church for preoccupying itself with religious affairs ignoring the social relevance of the Church.

In parts of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, this writer had witnessed the Church itself observing untouchability. Those untouchables who embraced Christianity have not been able to get over the stigma of untouchability and such of them are called "Harijan Christians". In a village (Korayur), near Madurai, these "Harijan Christians" have embraced Islam along with other untouchables having been disgusted by the way the Church practised discrimination against them. The radical groups inside both the Protestant and Catholic Church are critical of the way the Church is so preoccupied with "God" forgetting "man".

Such a revolt within the Church itself should not be overlooked by those who are critical of the Church and the Christian missionaries. A serious dialogue is going on inside the different Christian groups itself about the darker side of the Church. Therefore, we should be well aware of the shortcomings of the Church also while paying tributes to the good work done by it. At least a section among the Church has publicly protested



against the Church authorities for getting out of touch with the social realities and not throwing its lot fully with the struggling people.

It is true that the educational drive conducted by the Christians in States like Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Meghalaya, Assam, West Bengal, Bihar and other tribal areas has brought about tremendous awakening among the tribes. This writer had occasion to personally verify this in Bihar tribal belt. That the Christian tribes have been able to achieve tremendous progress compared to the non-converted lot was admitted by Kartik Oraon, now a Union minister and himself a non-Christian tribal leader from Ranchi, in an interview to this writer. In Nagaland, the literacy has touched almost cent per cent because of Christians. It may be true that while the tribals have gained a lot from the social, educational, economic and cultural activities conducted by the Church, some of them had got converted to Christianity. We do not say that the Church is not conducting conversion drive. But conversion is permitted under the Constitution and as long as conversion is not banned in India, Christians or anybody for that matter are perfectly within their right in undertaking such a job. The work of conversion is not confined to Christians alone. The RSS itself is doing that and it has established a chain of "Ashram Schools" in MP, Bihar, West Bengal etc, to convert tribals who are animists into Hinduism. RSS journals have publicised their efforts to Hinduise the tribals. Conversion work is carried on by the Ramakrishna Mission as well as Arya Samaj. If we object to conversion by the Christians, we have to equally object to conversion work by the RSS, Hindu Vishwa Parishad, Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission as well. There should be no double standard.

## **Subversive Activities**

The point here is what conversion has done to tribals and their culture. Whether the Church has won the heart of the tribals by fighting against their oppression? The CPM, the RSS or the Government cannot speak for tribals. It is the tribals who should say what the Christians have done to them.

The best educational institutions in every city and town in India is run by the Christians and many of our top leaders, officials, industrialists, professors, journalists, artists are themselves products of these institutions. If the literacy rate of Kerala, Tamilnadu and Karnataka and many other States has gone up the credit goes to the Church. Some of the best-run hospitals in India are owned by Christians. While we send our children to these institutions and get ourselves treated in these hospitals and praise their work, why do we condemn them when it does not suit us? As Indians, have they also not got the right to work for the uplift of the poor? Have they got no right to study and launch programmes for the weaker sections? Should they not concern with the suffering of the untouchables and tribals who are discarded by the Hindu religion? Why is it that only when the Church takes up such programmes for tribals, untouchables and other oppressed sections they are described as "subversive" and "politics"? Do we know that with all the so-called conversion efforts of the Church, the Christian population among the Tripura tribals is not even five per cent?

According to a statement made by a Union Minister of State for Home, Mr. Makwana, in Parliament (Aug. 1, 1980) it is the Christian missionaries who are



India

behind the Jharkhand agitation. He said missionaries have been organising the tribals to agitate on pro-tribal issues. However, he admitted that his statement was based on the West Bengal government reports, the truth of which is doubted by the tribals themselves.

What we would like to know from the Minister is from when did it become a crime in India to conscientise the tribals and untouchables and make them aware of their rights and assert it ?

The tribals are after all demanding a state (Jharkhand) of their own - nothing more. If such a demand could be dubbed antinational and subversive, why the Punjabi demand for a separate State was not described in similar terms then and put down ? When politicians have been fiddling with the Bihar tribals and elsewhere it is the missionaries who gave them succour and brought about tremendous awakening.

## Research Work

Grave charges have been made against Christian organisations engaged in research work. But are not Christians as much part of India as anybody else ? From when did it become a crime for Christian organisations to undertake research work ?

One such Christian research organisation between 1978-80 is engaged in 70 research programmes, publishing on an average five books per year. Some of its publications on the problem of untouchables have received tributes from many Dalit organisations and social scientists. Not only its record is unmatched,

but many Government and University research organisations are collaborating with it.

As for the charge of receiving foreign funds even the so-called "secular," government-sponsored research organisations are receiving much more foreign funds from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and other European and American sources. Many universities and even the governments are getting foreign funds.

Who is not getting foreign funds? CPM and CPI are also accused of getting foreign funds. Indira Gandhi's party was also accused of getting money from an Arabian country. RSS have also collected huge funds from abroad. Christian religion is an international religion unlike Hinduism. Christians in affluent countries contribute their mite for the well-being of their less fortunate people in the rest of the world. Foreigners who have become "Hindus" under the Hare Krishna cult and other institutions like the Rajaneesh Foundation do send contributions to India. The Satya Sai Baba gets millions of dollars from American disciples.

However, the Church of North India in its letter dated July 8, 1980, to Chief Minister Jyoti Basu of West Bengal has made it clear that "it has stopped accepting foreign aid for the running of Churches and normal programme. It is only for special projects that foreign assistance is still being received, as indeed in the case with many organisations run by various communities other than Christians, the Government of India and even some of our State Governments".

But all these "foreign contributions" are duly cleared by the Reserve Bank and every receipt organisation has to submit annual accounts to the Union Home



Ministry which approve it after getting satisfied about the utilisation of funds. That means there is a strict scrutiny at different stages. Therefore, where is the question of these foreign funds being used for "subversive purposes"?

## **Foreign Nationals**

Similarly "foreign nationals" have come to India fully cleared by the Government agencies and stay in India as long as the Government permits. Therefore, the charge of "foreign funds" flowing into Church and "foreigners" undertaking "subversive activities" have no substance. If there are any, they can be immediately brought to book under the existing law. Our CPM leaders and the RSS who make these charges against Christians would do well to prove the charge and book the culprit instead of making it an excuse to hide their weakness.

In this connection we would like to quote an editorial of the "Statesman" which refers to the CPM and Congress charge against the Church. "Missionary work might sometimes lead to uncomfortable situations for the Government but it is necessary to understand its humanitarian achievements before passing judgement. Assamese, for instance, was regarded as a dialect of Bengali until the Serampore Missionaries helped to equip it with the appurtenances of a separate language. This may indirectly have contributed to the later cultural awakening and present upheavals but it would be probably unfair to blame Serampore's linguistic pioneers for today's tumult in Assam. Other missionaries similarly encouraged tribal and backward communities

to rediscover their own heritage, take pride in their ethnic origins and to claim a distinctive identity for themselves. The process cannot be condemned because it also leads to political assertion". (Statesman, June 28, 1980)

Our CPM and RSS friends should know that credit for the development of different languages in India goes to the Christians. Printing itself was started by them. It is they who published the dictionary. Hindus in general are said to be narcissistic but how can facts of history be suppressed?

## **China & CIA**

Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, the Assistant Editor of Statesman, in a signed article in the Statesman (16-7-80) fully supports the just struggle of the tribals and criticises the efforts of the Government to pin the blame on the Church for the tribal uprising to preserve their distinct culture. "A wise leadership has an obligation to look beyond agitation to the roots of the grievances. There is little evidence now that this long-term perspective interests our rulers. They operate on the assumption that suppression of a few guerrilla leaders, would win over the people. Nor does a frantic search for scapegoats — China, CIA, welfare societies and Christian missionaries — suggest much awareness of the fact that the most resourceful and determined mischief-maker would not have been able to stir up rebellion if discontent did not already exist."

We can understand a rightwing bourgeoisie party like the Congress suppressing the people's movement but in the current struggle in Eastern India, the country's



Left parties like the CPM, which has been criticising the Congress party and the Janata of using the police and military to suppress the people's movement, has itself used the police and CRP to crush the struggle of the tribals. Not only that it asked the Central Government to rush the military to Tripura, Assam and areas where the tribals have rebelled against injustice. Is this Marxism?

Therefore, we are not surprised if all these tribals who were originally in CPM are deserting it and forming their own tribal parties to fight for self-determination and cultural preservation which have suddenly become anathema to the CPM. How can a party be called revolutionary and Marxist if it does not support the just struggle, feelings and aspirations of the country's two most revolutionary classes - namely untouchables and tribals? How can it be called a friend of the minorities when Muslims are shot down in the Mallapuram (Kerala) police-firing?

V. N. Gopa Kumar writing under the title "West Bengal's tribal unrest" in the Leftist Journal, "Mainstream" (19-7-80) says - "The communists are no longer looked upon by the tribals as their champions, that role has now been virtually taken over by the Jharkhand party and Jharkhand Mukti-Morcha". Referring to the charge of "subversion" against the Church, he says "The involvement of the Church in the movement is suspected though the Darjeeling Catholic Bishop has expressed his strong indignation at the charge. The church has numerous cultural organisations, chiefly educational, in the region, and the Church authorities defend that their education aroused the aspirations of the people and they cannot be attacked for it", he says and adds: Communists are no longer the stalwarts of the tribal people

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as was the case in the past". Bihuram Boro, working president of the All - Assam Tribal Protection Action Committee, says: "The left front Government in Tripura had totally failed to protect the lives and properties of Tipari Tribals who, he said, were the original inhabitants of Tripura". (Statesman Aug. 25-1980).

Another strange coincidence is that on the issue of this tribal uprising the RSS view and that of the CPM has been surprisingly identical. Both have dubbed the tribal demand for self-determination, as "separatist" and "secessionist". Sumanta Bannerjee writing in "Deccan Herald" (25-6-80) under the headline: "Indian Left has no Base in North-East", says:- "The situation in the North East thus reflects the total alienation of the Left from the mood of the local people".

The Indian Left is getting thoroughly exposed. On the question of suppressing the people's struggle in the North-East, the CPM has joined hands with Indira Gandhi. And in pointing an accusing finger at the Church, it has joined hands with the RSS and other Hindu communal organisations. Some of the CPM leaders' statements against Christians are exactly on the lines of the tirade against the church in the "Organiser", the official organ of the RSS. On the question of foreign policy also both the CPM and CPI have found total Identity with Mrs. Gandhi. Therefore, we will not be surprised if the upper caste-dominated Left suffers a total collapse when the minorities and other culturally suppressed sections like the untouchables and tribals rise up to demand justice. This is yet another example of "How Marx failed in Hindu India."

How to save Marxism from our Indian Marxists?

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# THE AUTHOR

Mr. V. T. Rajshekar Shetty, a noted journalist and writer, was till last year a senior correspondent of the Indian Express, Bangalore. A Marxist and rationalist, he is the author of several works. His first major work is "Dalit Movement in Karnataka". Other works are : (1) "Conspiracy Behind Communal Riots," a study of India's Muslim problem ; (2) "How Marx Failed in Hindu India" ; (3) "Havanur and the Bible of the Backward Classes" ; (4) "Crocodile Tears on Harijan Atrocities" ; (5) "Dalita Sahitya", (6) "Apartheid in India" ; (7) "Ambedkar and His Conversion: A Critique" ; (8) "Class-Caste Struggle" (under publication)-all published by the Karnataka Dalit Action Committee.

Mr. Shetty, who was dismissed from the Indian Express in 1979 at the instance of communal forces, had served Deccan Herald, Bangalore, Indian Express and Free Press Journal, Bombay, and Patriot, New Delhi.

He is the President of the India-China Friendship Association, Karnataka, Secretary of the Citizens for Democracy, Bangalore, and Karnataka Rationalists Association. He is actively connected with the movement of the untouchables, backward classes, tribals and Muslims and several organisations.